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JOINT POLICY COMMITTEE — REGIONAL PLANNING PROGRAM

Date: November 8, 2007
To: Joint Policy Committee
From: Ted Droettboom, Regional Planning Program Director
Subject: Regional Transportation Plan—Policy Choices

On October 26th, ABAG and MTC held a joint General Assembly and Transportation Plan Summit at the Oakland Marriott Hotel. The meeting addressed the challenges and choices facing the Bay Area over the next quarter century with a concentration on the 2035 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). About 700 people attended and reacted to a staff analysis of investment and policy choices relative to a set of performance targets, a panel discussion of critical issues, and a presentation of preliminary public polling results.

At the November 16th JPC, staff will reprise the highlights of their analysis, provide more information on the public-opinion poll and summarize feedback received at the Oakland meeting through the panel discussion, breakout sessions and comment forms. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation outlining the staff analysis is available at:

http://www.mtc.ca.gov/meetings/events/forum/Summit_Challenges_Choices.ppt.

The principal planning innovation suggested for the 2035 RTP is the introduction of explicit, quantitative targets against which to assess plan performance. In summary, the staff analysis concludes that our provisional performance targets will be very difficult to achieve. This is particularly the case for the targets related to greenhouse gases and particulate matter. Pricing and land use can help us greatly reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita. However, when we factor in population growth, the best we can do is about one-half of our emission target. And that requires our highest-performing infrastructure package coupled with very aggressive land-use changes and pricing policies.

Targets related to congestion relief and affordability/equity are somewhat more attainable. Cost-effective freeway operation investments take us to about fifty percent of our congestion target and aggressive land-use and pricing options take us the rest of the way. The policy-based land-use assumptions already built into our transportation plan nearly achieve our affordability objective, though the pricing scenario wipes out the affordability improvements achieved through land use.

Pricing and land-use generally outperform infrastructure investments in moving us toward our targets. However, both the pricing and land-use scenarios are very ambitious relative to present practice. The pricing scenario, for example, increases the cost of driving by about five times.

Further there does not seem to be a great deal of public and political support for pricing alternatives. A particularly important issue, even among pricing supporters, is dealing with the substantial equity issues associated with higher transportation costs. More intense land-use also enjoys only partial support, and the fiscal resources required to achieve land-use change are sorely lacking.

Additional options are potentially available to help us close the gaps between our infrastructure investments, our potential policies and our targets. These include improvements in vehicle and fuel technology, telecommuting and other transportation demand strategies, pricing discounts, and general changes in travel attitudes and behaviors. However, none of these will be easy either.

Within this challenging context, staff is seeking the Joint Policy Committee's guidance in refining the policy basis for the 2035 RTP. That refinement will likely occur over more than a few JPC meetings. Staff will be raising a number of specific questions and policy choices over the course of their presentations to the Committee, and we anticipate an active discussion. In preparation for the first meeting, we suggest the JPC members think about their response to four general questions which encompass and underlie many of the more detailed issues which confront the 2035 Transportation Plan:

1. After observing how difficult it will be to achieve our provisional targets and how good intentions can be misinterpreted and abused, should we continue to break new ground by constructing the next RTP on a performance basis?
2. Noting that pricing can be a powerful short-term tool for addressing our climate-change objectives and for funding many improvements, but that there are significant obstacles to public acceptability and significant equity challenges to be overcome, how should we introduce pricing in this plan?
3. With the knowledge that land-use changes can also be very helpful over the longer term in reducing VMT and hence both greenhouse gases and ground-level pollutants, but that there is also significant community resistance to infill and redevelopment, how should we use the funding and investment packages in the transportation plan to support priority development areas and encourage more focused growth?
4. In the context of the plan's provisional targets and information about the relative effectiveness of infrastructure investments in achieving those targets, what principles should we employ to structure planned and potential infrastructure packages so as to have maximum impact for the dollars invested?